

# Elontra Hall reviews

## Tom Paulin, Mark Ward and Sarah Howe

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### **Namanlagh**

Tom Paulin  
Faber, £12.99

### **Masters**

Mark Ward  
The Emma Press, £7.99

### **Foretokens**

Sarah Howe  
Chatto & Windus, £12.99

Reading **Namanlagh** I felt like a traveller in a strange land.

I was intrigued to see what qualities made it stand out in the vast sea of poetry published in the past year. I confess, initially, I was confused. The references to places and historical figures made me feel like I was lost in a land where the language was ostensibly similar to mine, but only, maybe, every third word. A lot was lost in translation. At first.

**Namanlagh** maps both time and space – specifically Northern Ireland – as a location, and as a historical palimpsest. Paulin's use of colloquial language, such as “craychur” (*Namanlagh*) and “claggy” (*Decommissioning I*) embodies a defiance and confidence in the collection's Northern Irishness

that marks this collection unique.

**Namanlagh** is also successful as a memorial; it pays homage to a host of honoured dead, those who died in military service, loved ones lost while away, and even poets, killed for doing what the muse demands that they do: closely observe the world, speak the truth, and imagine possible futures, whether they be utopian or otherwise.

The more closely I read **Namanlagh**, the more I connected to the places that Paulin penned, augmented by the time I took to dig in and learn about the Orange Order, Paul Leon, and Huguenots, among other things. Here, Paulin has also crafted and presented to us a collection as window through which to view the process and doubts of an aging poet, as well as to allow light to fall on the things they hold most dear.

Paulin's soundscapes are lush and varied, with assonance and near rhyme woven through most pieces. His use of form is also worthy of note. Stichic poems dominate the collection, with the others being some of the few poems that are stanzaic. These poems, particularly *Quand vous serez bien vieille* and *The Work of Her Hands*, create an immersive and immediate quality:

a claypot it's a flowerpot  
broken in one corner

the corridor between our bedroom  
and the living room is packed  
with smashed bric-a-brac  
as I gather up her bits and pieces  
(*The Work of Her Hands*)

I found myself, by turns, frustrated, fascinated, and  
fixated on Paulin's use of craft. His use of rhyme is  
sometimes distracting, and at other times subtly  
employed and effective at drawing attention right to  
where it needs to be.

a metal tunnel  
what looked like an infinite funnel  
made from stretched steel  
that's both real and unreal  
like a problem in physics  
which doesn't in fact exist  
(*Edge of Town*)

That said, **Namanlagh** is special in that it is a  
collection that does many things well in a very short  
space. The collection is a map, a memorial, an  
exploration, a warning, and a window, engaging the  
head and the heart by embracing the challenges  
Paulin faces as a writer, and sharing the histories that  
mean the most to him.

**Masters** is an ecstatic ekphrastic pamphlet of poems  
where Ward explores two evergreen concerns in  
poetry: love and art.

Writing in response to twenty different works of art,  
Ward explores love of all kinds. Not just romantic love  
or love between people, but love of place and art  
itself, as he attempts to create a map of queer/gay art  
through time.

In these paintings, they've captured the men,  
their glance in which a world can be remade  
or passed by: the risk of it, implicit.  
(*Cherry Trees, Winter*)

Though this is not the central concern of every poem,  
it is the collection's central thesis.

It is in this way that **Masters** sits in contrast to  
**Namanlagh**, as it doesn't focus so much on place as it  
does on feeling or connection. Ward's use of art as a  
lens through which to observe and explore  
connections yields the most fruit when its exploration  
focuses on the connections between people:

I kiss you and it feels like the funfair  
where we first met. The others are watching  
the boys we were find each other again.  
(*Sunset*)

Ward has crafted **Masters** as an ever-shifting and  
restless constellation of poems, finding some of its  
only constancy in its ekphrasis and its formal  
transformations from one poem to the next. Where  
one poem may be in solid quatrains, the next may  
make use of slashes and gapping:

time cannot /watch/the sheets absorb  
the dirt/my body floating  
I hear your voice/Itry/tospeak/ and you  
(*Three Studies of Two Figures*)

This kind of formal experimentation and play is what  
gives **Masters** its vivacity. Still, it belies Ward's deft  
control of form, which allows him to confidently  
make such choices in the first place, evident in the  
range of modified sonnets, strung through the  
pamphlet, such as:

Before you left, we'd hug  
but it had a time limit, a few seconds

where it would feel like home  
but then we'd remember.  
(*Medical Students*)

and:

but love never felt like that. I wrote you  
odes to wake up to, painted how you made me

feel.  
(*Romantic Landscapes*)

Fitting form and sentiment for a collection that, at its heart, is an exploration of love and its permutations.

Here too, as in **Namanlagh**, I often found myself an ignorant traveller, at the mercy of the poet insofar as it pertains to the images selected in **Masters**. And although I did not need the paintings next to me as I read through the collection, seeing them afterwards added an further layer of enjoyment and satisfaction and, in some cases, satiated my curiosity about the poetic responses and other poetic possibilities.

In the end, **Masters** is a finely crafted, lively, and fulfilling pamphlet.

After a significant gap between her debut collection and this, Howe's sophomore effort, **Foretokens** carried with it a certain level of anticipation. I can happily report that this newest work was indeed worth waiting for.

Where **Masters** is a pamphlet in response to art, and **Namanlagh** is a mapping of time and space and the challenges of being a poet, **Foretokens** reads as a blend of both. Like the others, it explores a multiplicity of concerns. However, of the three, it feels the most cohesive. Howe is able, through her control of form and willingness to explore and experiment, to enhance the emotional potency of the poems throughout the collection.

Howe weaves the collection's most singular concern – origin, provenance, inheritance – through each poem:

Offspring of Asian parents, driven by anxiety or  
aspiration

...  
this is an angry poem, however Zen I seem.  
In my mind's ear, the night-time radio's consoling  
hum.

Well, here we are. Look how far we've come.  
(*World Service*)

In this poem, Howe critiques not only the primacy of Received Pronunciation, but also the shame and feelings of inadequacy that come with it, as well as revealing the pernicious and lingering effects of colonialism.

Howe's work shines most brightly in these lyric explorations, showing itself in *Songs Spun of Us*, of course, but also in the Undersongs, and the collection's interspersed erasures.

By drawing inspiration from such a wide range of sources, artistic and otherwise, Howe's play is refreshing, allowing her poems, regardless of subject matter – be it family heritage, emigration, or DNA itself – to sing and land softly:

T hink of a biological Bletchley, churning enigm A

T hrough its whirring servers; chinks of a  
digital vist A

T hat only processors can reveal in the blur of dat  
A...  
(*Songs Spun of Us*)

Here Howe's mise-en-page loosely mimics a section of a DNA strand, while it muses thoughtfully about the intersection of man and machine: one not able to fully understand its workings without the other – both fitting and somewhat troubling, given the rise and proliferation of AI.

Away from nature, Howe also explores motherhood, with a number of speakers examining their abilities as mother, and their relationships with their own mothers, as in *Waking*:

I will take  
each day by restless day until we hear your cry  
rise among the liquid stars assembled as you wake.

And again in *A History of My Relationship with My Mother in Twenty-three Arguments about the Laundry*:

I think of her at night still sitting at the morning  
room table alone at three-thirty ... waiting  
for the *beep beep beep* too high-pitched for her  
ageing ears to hear

Howe also gives voice to the objects from which she  
writes her ekphrastic pieces, in a form akin to a crown  
of sonnets, in the section 'In The Chinese Ceramics  
Gallery'. Here, not only do the objects speak to us as  
readers, but also to each other, as the last line in each  
poem in the gallery appears in some form at the start  
of the next poem.

Ask the sugar

bowl here what it is it sweetens. One day  
the English will forget who invented tea.

*(Porcelain Tea Caddy Painted  
in Underglaze Blue)*

The English will forget who invented tea.  
The way you might not guess, at first,  
who made me, or why.

*(Finely Potted White Glazed  
Porcelain Cup, Dehua Ware)*

Fittingly, the sequence ends as it starts, with "I, too,  
am a survivor".

**Foretokens** is a beautiful examination of deeply  
personal concerns that never alienates, attempting  
instead, to draw us in closer.

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